

PHILANTHROPY FORUM 2009

Breakfast with Betty Amsden

Introduction

When Betty Amsden gave \$5 million dollars to the Arts Centre in Melbourne earlier this year, non-profit CEOs, fundraisers and board members may well have asked: 'Where do we find our Betty Amsden?'

At 82, Betty has been a philanthropist for many years and closely involved with many national and local charities. She met Frankie Airey more than 10 years ago and the philanthropist and philanthropy consultant have conversed many times on the subject of giving.

As the philanthropy debate gathers momentum in Australia, Betty and Frankie have decided to make their conversations public in a bid to engage and educate senior staff and board members in the non-profit sector.

Betty and Frankie propose that good fundraising leads to increased philanthropy and in a series of Spring breakfasts with non-profit leaders, Betty articulated the keys to good fundraising.

Why give?

Betty was born in a time when things weren't easy to get but her parents instilled two things into her: the harder you work, the luckier you'll get and always give to those less fortunate than yourself.

Betty has always given to charity, both time and money, but it was not until she retired that she became involved in non-profit management as a board member. After building a successful business in aged care and finding retirement not to her liking, Betty needed something meaningful to do so she joined several non-profit boards and more recently chaired the Philanthropy Council at the Arts Centre.

Not happy to sit back and pontificate, Betty is very involved in the grass roots of the organisations she supports: meeting beneficiaries, working alongside employees and rallying others to help. And it is this involvement that motivates her to continue her support.

"I get so much from giving. To know that I have helped future generations is wonderful," Betty says.

Finding my passion

Betty's passion is young people. As a child, she didn't get the chance to see any kind of performance on stage. She wants young people today to have greater access to both seeing and participating in the performing arts.

The Philanthropy Manager at the Arts Centre did her homework, discovered Betty's passion and developed it over five years. This person and a close relationship with both the CEO and the General Manager, she says, were the key to her \$5 million donation after 25 years of involvement with the Arts Centre.

Not that Betty confines her donations to the Arts, she also donates to a range of causes including animal welfare and hospitals. Whatever the cause, she says that good relationships with fundraisers, CEO's and board members have ensured her continued support.

"A good fundraiser develops a trusting relationship based on mutual respect, ensures the donor is looked after and above all listens to the donor's needs," she says.

Trust

Twenty-five years into her philanthropy career, Betty describes herself as a strategic giver. But, she says, that developed over years of giving and wondering why charities were so quick to take money but not so quick to tell her what it was being used for.

Part of the strategic thinking behind her remarkable contribution was selection of the best vehicle to deliver the funds. Betty could have chosen to set up a PPF or a foundation in her name but for two reasons she made her donation as an endowment to the Arts Centre: age and the fact that she has no surviving relatives.

With a foundation, Betty was concerned about the administrative burden both before and after her death but with 25 years of involvement with the Arts Centre, Betty feels sure that her donation will be used wisely for programs close to her heart.

"They welcome new ideas and do all the administrative work but above all else, I trust them," she says.

Everything comes from the top

Fundraisers are only part of the solution, Betty says, and can be held back by both the CEO and the Board. Betty sees time and again that fundraising is handballed to one person or a small team when it is impossible for fundraisers to work in isolation.

Frankie describes Betty's generous donation to the Arts Centre as a 'text book' major gift. First Betty was a member, then Associate, Angel and recently Chair of the Philanthropy Council. At each stage, she had regular contact with the fundraiser, manager, CEO and members of the Board. The trust and mutual respect built gradually over many years until she made her endowment as a kind of 'farewell gift' to the General Manager and CEO who were both retiring.

Strategic donors won't give money without being sure it will do some good, Betty says. It is only when donors have a strong relationship with key leaders in an organisation, become involved in running the organisation and see the benefit for themselves that they will be willing to invest.

This involvement may mean that the donor wishes to support a new initiative or specific area, which is when fundraisers become agents for cultural change. Organisations may need to change direction slightly or add a new dimension to accommodate large, private donations. Non-profit leaders who work in tandem with their fundraising team and remain involved with donors will be in a position to reap the benefits of this flexibility.

"Major gifts are the result of a courtship. The fundraiser orchestrates the courtship but is not the sole point of contact. The whole organisation needs to be involved," Betty says.

Boards who take responsibility

In America and Canada where philanthropy is well developed, every board member either makes a regular donation or undertakes to procure funding. Betty feels strongly that non-profit Board members in Australia need to wake up to their role and get more involved. Time is not enough.

If Board members are unwilling to invest in the charity they manage then donors will also be wary of making large donations. The Board also needs to be 100% behind the fundraiser, she says. It is easy to say, 'go out and get funds' but a successful organisation pulls together and raises funds as a team.

Betty believes that Board members need to be educated on how to become part of the philanthropic team. As well as giving personally, they should be willing to facilitate meetings with potential new donors, bring people along to major events and rally support for the fundraising team

"There has been a shift in board thinking to take more responsibility but there is still a gap in non-profit management knowledge," she says.

Finally, a simple thank you

When asked what is the common factor in the organisations she supports, Betty responds with simply: a smile and a thank you.

Initially shunning publicity when she made the \$5 million gift, Betty was eventually persuaded to feature in a discreet article in the hope that it would inspire others to give. She doesn't want to see her name in lights but is motivated to continue her support when beneficiaries say thank you, with sincerity.

Following her gift, Betty went to see a play at the Arts Centre. The door usher recognised her and thanked her for her gift to the organisation. She was so delighted with the spontaneous gratitude she now funds a staff development fund.

So where do you find your own Betty Amsden? The answer might be right in front of you, walking your corridors or receiving your annual appeal. It might not be this year or in the next five years but those who feel that what they give makes a difference will want to keep giving.

"I started out as a small donor to many organisations 25 years ago. It's very easy to stop writing cheques to those who don't nurture their donors," Betty says.

Written by Jo Crowston